

Gold medal-winning Olympic gymnast Shewfelt becomes a champion of his city

By Valerie Fortney, Calgary Herald June 11, 2013

Recommend

1

Tweet

3

1



Kyle Shewfelt, Olympic gold medallist in gymnastics from the Athens games, poses alongside his likeness in the Olympian Heights exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibit is a collection of portraits of some of Canada's iconic Olympic and Paralympic heroes.

Photograph by: Ted Rhodes , Calgary Herald

At the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics, Kyle Shewfelt was the toast of Canada. His gold medal in men's floor exercise, the first Canadian gold at those games, was also the first artistic gymnastics medal of any kind for this country.

Nine years later, the 31-year-old former athlete and native Calgarian is continuing to build upon his successful career in new and innovative ways. He's logged countless miles across the country as a public speaker, served as a TV commentator at such events as the 2012 London Summer Olympics and, he notes with a big smile, just competed in his first triathlon.

It's his work in the community, though, of which he is the most proud these days. "I'm really engaged in life and trying to make an impact," he says of his work with such events as the annual Kyle Shewfelt Gymnastics Festival and the charity Right to Play. "I love Calgary — and I want to do my part to make this city even better."

This fall, Shewfelt plans to make good on that promise with the opening of Kyle Shewfelt Gymnastics (for details, email info@kyleshewfelt.com), an 11,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art facility in the city's southeast that will offer gymnastic programming to Calgarians of all ages. "It's going to start out with a purely recreational focus," he notes of the centre that will be located near the Deerfoot Casino, "with the intention to have a competitive program later."

I meet up with the disarmingly warm and charming Shewfelt on Tuesday morning at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the public visual arts institution in Calgary's municipal building at Macleod Trail and 9th Avenue S.E.

A few days earlier, Shewfelt was one of the celebrity athletes on hand for the opening night of Olympian Heights, a show featuring various works depicting our most iconic Olympic and Paralympic sports legends, created by local artists. The show runs until July 1.

The dozen works, everything from wood cuts to abstract paintings, provide a who's-who of both sport and art: John Hall is paired with hockey great Hayley Wickenheiser, Elena Evanoff with skating icon Catriona Le May Doan, while Shewfelt was immortalized by Chris Cran, an internationally recognized Calgary artist.

"When they asked me to come on board, I jumped at the opportunity," says Shewfelt of the brainchild of MOCA board member Viviane Mehr, who also participated as an artist with her mixed media work of triathlete Simon Whitfield. Mehr's idea was inspired by the gallery's January show of Andy Warhol's The Athlete Series. "I love all forms of art," he says, adding he understands the pressures artists face, such as creating something for the world to judge. "I spent 16 years building up to one minute, 30 seconds, where it all matters."

Jeffrey Spalding agrees with Shewfelt's claim that these two seemingly disparate disciplines share some common ground. "We are a sports city," says Spalding, artistic director of MOCA. "In a show like this, we can showcase our athletes and our artists, people who have extraordinary abilities on an international stage."

Along with bringing yet another exciting show to this public gallery that has gone from an average 3,800 visitors a year to a projected 24,000 for 2013, Olympian Heights also raised nearly \$80,000 through a live auction of the works, which will be shared by the artists and the institution.

Shewfelt credits this collaboration with MOCA for giving him the inspiration to finally commit to starting his own gymnastics club, something that has been rattling around the back of his mind for a long time. "It connected me to my love for this city even more than before — Calgary is such an interesting place and I want to be a part of that."

While he's had the kind of success most young athletes only dream of, the road before and after hasn't always been an easy one. "It's a lot of hard work and sacrifice, he says of a childhood spent in such places as the Altadore Gym Club. "But I like to work hard — it isn't just about winning a medal, it's about setting a goal and chasing after it, giving it everything you've got."

That never-say-die attitude would be put to the test at the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, where Shewfelt competed only six months after suffering kneecap fractures from a bad training landing.

Today, his knees are in decent enough shape — "I can feel them creak when I run in the cold," he admits — to try his hand at new sports. He also remains philosophical about the lack of post-Olympics sponsorships for gymnasts compared with that of gold medallists in higher profile sports. "I wasn't expecting it," he says. "Bell Canada came on as a sponsor, which allowed me to keep training and prepare for Beijing, which I'm thankful for."

What was tough, he confesses, was the void created by the end of his competitive career. "After it was all over, I was like, 'What do I do now?' It took a while to reinvigorate that same drive."

A stint at Mount Royal University to study TV broadcasting followed, along with the start of his public speaking and commentating work. It wasn't until this past year, though, that Shewfelt recaptured his old razor sharp focus.

"Starting up my own gym is a lot of pressure, absolutely. But I like pressure," says the infectiously optimistic Olympian. "I had this realization I needed to have gymnastics as part of my every day. I feel that that's my legacy."

These days, Shewfelt says he couldn't be happier. He shares a home in the inner city with his girlfriend, interior designer Kristin Desilets — they met four years ago at a class at Yoga Mandala — and their Brittany spaniel, Cooper.

“I feel really blessed,“ he says of a life filled with the kind of variety that takes him from testing his physical limits in new ways and planning a new business, to charity work and being the spokesperson for an art exhibit celebrating artists and athletes. “I also feel really grounded in who I am and the impact I want to have.”

vfortney@calgaryherald.com

Twitter.com/ValFortney

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald **Buy this article at www.HeraldContentMarketplace.com**

Buy this article at www.HeraldContentMarketplace.com